

# Foucault Studies

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Ghamari-Tabrizi, Behrooz. 2016. *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment*. Muslim International. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.**

For the most part, while they come to different conclusions, both Foucault's critics and defenders in the Foucault-in-Iran debate have agreed that Foucault got something fundamentally *wrong* about the revolution, about Iran, and about Islam in general. Foucault's critics see his stance on the Iranian Revolution as clear evidence of his preference for pure domination over liberal governmentality, medieval authoritarianism over modernity, and a self-abnegating spirituality over free individuality. On the other hand, even those inclined to be charitable to Foucault's position show little willingness to defend a position Foucault himself abandoned (and never mentioned in public again) following the wave of public criticism his reporting on Iran received. Foucault's critics often interpret this silence, as well as Foucault's late career shift in focus, as a tacit admission of fault.

Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi's *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment* (2016) is a new and welcome attempt to shift the ground of the ongoing debate about Michel Foucault's articles on the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79. Ghamari-Tabrizi rejects the premise that Foucault was wrong about the Iranian Revolution in any meaningful way, and furthermore offers an interpretation of Foucault's late-career work on subjectivity and ethics as a development and expansion on, not a repudiation of, his approach to the Iranian Revolution.

The argument of *Foucault in Iran* is not concerned with the fine-grained details of Foucault's articles. As Ghamari-Tabrizi writes, "I do not consider this book to be an extended commentary on Foucault" (7). Instead, Ghamari-Tabrizi shifts the focus of the Foucault-in-Iran affair away from Foucault himself—his purported errors, the relevance his Iran articles have for interpreting his larger body of work—toward a larger problematic.

On the whole, Ghamari-Tabrizi characterises Foucault's articles as an attempt to understand the Iranian Revolution on terms that escape "Eurocentric theories of power, politics, and history... [and] the discursive frames that make revolutions legible" (xiii). Foucault's critics, on Ghamari-Tabrizi's view, responded (and still respond) to his articles on Iran based on an "Enlightenment rationalist fundamentalism" (15). The elements of this Eurocentric understanding as Ghamari-Tabrizi depicts it are, first, that Islam is fundamentally unchanging, timeless, and regressively medieval, and second, that the history of

secularism in Europe is the universal model of state development. The reaction to Foucault on Iran, therefore, is Eurocentric in that it is rooted in a sense that Islam is neither legitimately political nor legitimately revolutionary. In response, Ghamari-Tabrizi argues first that Islamic politics (and Islamism) is a pragmatic, creative response to contemporary politics and exigencies, and second, that there are possibilities for political revolution and state-development beyond the secular horizon. This, in sum, is Ghamari-Tabrizi's reading of the Foucault-in-Iran controversy: Foucault tried to understand the revolution on non-Eurocentric terms, and the subsequent critical reaction was and is characteristically and symptomatically "Whiggish" (4) Eurocentrism.

Each chapter of *Foucault in Iran* is therefore structured as a broad response to one or more reductionist, Eurocentric, or universalist misconceptions, misinterpretations, or misreadings of Foucault's understanding of the Iranian revolution. The focus on Foucault varies from chapter to chapter—chapters 2 and 5 are concentrated studies of Foucault's writing, while the others are wider engagements with issues relevant to the debate. Each chapter is steeped in the historiography of the revolution—Ghamari-Tabrizi's area of specialty—and provides a set of detailed explorations of the political forces at work in Iran before, during, and immediately following the revolution.

Chapters 1, 3 and 4 are detailed arguments that defy useful summarisation in a short review. In general these three chapters stress two main points, along different lines. First, it is not possible to read Iranian revolutionary politics through a secular lens, as Foucault's critics do. In Iran at the time of the revolution, as Ghamari-Tabrizi argues, to be secular generally meant to be aligned with the Shah, and Ghamari-Tabrizi firmly establishes that there was no anti-Shah secularism on the ground. The exigencies of anti-Shah politics led to what Ghamari-Tabrizi depicts as a truly syncretic movement in which leftism was articulated in an Islamic vernacular and Islamic politics embraced a left politics of emancipation. But overall, Ghamari-Tabrizi argues, in essence, that there was no path for the revolution to take *but* through Islam. And while Foucault's critics fault him for ignoring the role (and plight) of women in Iran, Ghamari-Tabrizi argues that the revolution was marked by a gender politics that all western feminists were blind to. In Ghamari-Tabrizi's account, other western observers, specifically Kate Millet and Simone de Beauvoir, ignored the ways in which Iranian revolutionary "women sought to legitimize their gender politics with references to nonpatriarchal interpretations of Islam" (GT 154-5).

Second, Ghamari-Tabrizi does a lot of heavy historiographical lifting to establish that in the immediate postrevolutionary period Foucault was observing, there was no set script for what an 'Islamic government' might look like. On Ghamari-Tabrizi's account, this period, in 1979 and 1980, was an uncertain period, filled with contingencies, dangers, and possibilities, which did not inevitably have to produce the hard line Islamic theocracy that governs Iran now. Foucault's undue 'enthusiasm' for revolutionary Islam is therefore not unjustified, as Foucault's critics claim: Ghamari-Tabrizi argues that Foucault saw possibilities for governance in the Islamic Iranian revolutionary politics of the time, possibilities that were open especially while Mehdi Bazargan acted as head of the provisional government.

In chapters 2 and 5, Ghamari-Tabrizi focuses more closely on Foucault's articles. In chapter 2, Ghamari-Tabrizi folds Foucault's depiction of the Iranian Revolution into his theories of power and subjectivation. Ghamari-Tabrizi characterises these articles as an attempt to see the revolution as transformative on the subjective level. This transformation, as Foucault depicts it, is a becoming *in* and *through* the bodies of the revolutionaries, simultaneously animated by and creating—becoming—a political spirituality. Most importantly, Ghamari-Tabrizi emphasises the way in which Foucault's depiction of the revolution departs from the 'universalist' script, in which a legitimate revolution is emancipatory or progressive according to an inherent principle, either liberal or socialist. Foucault's critics miss this point, as Ghamari-Tabrizi argues, in that they reject the basic elements of Foucault's approach, that is, first, that revolutions are transformative as opposed to emancipatory, and second, such transformations can involve (and not overcome) religious practice or belief.

Chapter 5 will probably be of greatest interest to scholars concerned primarily with Foucault and less with the Iranian Revolution. It does not stand alone, however, as it closes the circle on the entire argument of the book. It addresses the question of how, and even if, we should consider Foucault's understanding of Iran in the context of his late-career body of work. Ghamari-Tabrizi frames this chapter as a response to Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson's claim (Afary and Anderson 2005) that Foucault's late career work, in particular the essay "What is Enlightenment?", is an implicit repudiation or even apology for his earlier position on Iran.

Working against this claim, Ghamari-Tabrizi folds Foucault's articles on Iran into an interpretation of his late-career work on subjectivation. In general, he argues that both Foucault's work on Iran and the general thrust of his later work are about the limits and possibilities of subjectivation and self-fashioning. He argues that "What is Enlightenment?" in particular is steeped in Foucault's Iranian experience and is in no way an apology, and furthermore that Foucault's late career interest in subjectivity and the enlightenment is inspired in part by Iran, not a rejection of his experiences and writing on Iran.

Ghamari-Tabrizi puts the case for reading Foucault's experience in Iran into the interpretation of his later-career work strongly (he implies a direct relationship between his late-career turn and his experiences in Iran), following, as he states in the conclusion, the example of Susan Buck-Morss' interpretation of Hegel's understanding of the Haitian slave revolt. This influence, as Ghamari-Tabrizi observes, remains textually implicit in both Hegel's and Foucault's work.

It is at this point where we encounter a central tension in Ghamari-Tabrizi's argument. Ghamari-Tabrizi attributes Foucault's identification a 'political spirituality' at work in the Iranian Revolution to the influence of two French scholars of Islamic studies, Louis Massignon and Henry Corbin, who emphasize mystic and spiritual Islamic traditions over traditions of law and jurisprudence—the latter of which formed the basis of Islamic government in Iran. On this basis Ghamari-Tabrizi concludes that Foucault's understanding of the Iranian revolution was Orientalist in that he attributed too much 'spirituality' to

Islam and ignored its legalism (73-4). The point being, the provisional, revolutionary subjectivity animated by 'political spirituality' that Foucault observes is, on Ghamrai-Tabrizi's own argument, at least in part an Orientalist construct. If, as Ghamari-Tabrizi argues, Foucault's articles on Iran have relevance for his later-career body of work, then it is necessary to account for this Orientalist influence, a question which Ghamari-Tabrizi does not address at length.

This is one example of a more general point on which Ghamari-Tabrizi's argument is vulnerable: in terms of its structure, *Foucault in Iran* deals with Foucault in broad strokes, but deals with Foucault's critics in fine details. It is not necessary to mention any particular example here, but Foucault's articles *are* filled with numerous objectionable claims, none of which Ghamari-Tabrizi addresses directly. This tension does not defeat his argument, but it is a point on which it is vulnerable to attack.

That said, Ghamari-Tabrizi's fine-grained attack on the basic substance of Afary and Anderson's scholarship (down to identifying cherry-picked and tendentiously misinterpreted quotations) should, along with strong critical reviews elsewhere from Jonathan Rée,<sup>1</sup> Alberto Toscano,<sup>2</sup> and Bonnie Honig,<sup>3</sup> put the final nail in that book's coffin.

More generally, the argument gains an air of authority based on Ghamari-Tabrizi's personal experience of the revolution. In the preface, Ghamari-Tabrizi notes that he was a student in Tehran in the late 1970s, and was present at the famed Ten-Nights poetry reading at the Goethe Institute in October 1977 (xi, 26-30). He indicates that in writing *Foucault in Iran* he struggled with the question of how to frame his own personal experiences of the revolution. Ultimately he chose to set these experiences aside, while at the same time noting that his research has led him to reflect on his own memories and to revise his understanding of the revolution.

This amounts to an apophantic appeal to his own authority as an eyewitness and historical actor: Ghamari-Tabrizi has effectively claimed that, *as an eyewitness to these events*, what Foucault wrote about the revolution is not objectionable to him. But in setting aside his authority as an eyewitness, he has upset the basic premise of the Foucault-in-Iran debate. Ghamari-Tabrizi has shifted the ground of the debate away from the question of who has the authority to evaluate and judge—Foucault or his critics—and toward questions of memory, history, experience, narrative, and discourse.

Overall, *Foucault in Iran* is a worthwhile attempt to say something new about this affair. This book gives anyone interested in the debate a reason to pause and take a moment to reconsider the premises on which it is assumed Foucault was wrong. And it serves as ammunition in the debate against a purely secularist position that denies any legitimate role to political Islam. Most significantly for those interested in Foucault, this book also repoliticises Foucault's later period along a new line of inquiry. It places Foucault's later

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<sup>1</sup> "The Treason of the Clerics," *The Nation*, July 28, 2005, <https://www.thenation.com/article/treason-clerics/>.

<sup>2</sup> "Dossier for the Prosecution," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 136 (2006): 54–57.

<sup>3</sup> "Review Essay: What Foucault Saw at the Revolution: On the Use and Abuse of Theology for Politics," *Political Theory* 36, no. 2 (April 2008): 301–12, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591707312453>.

work on the procedures and technologies of self-fashioning and subjectivation firmly in the context of his Iranian articles, again making these articles relevant material for anyone grappling with the fundamental political problems of revolution, emancipation, change, becoming, uncertainty, possibility, and subjectivity.

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